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## The Foxfire Approach: Perspectives and Core Practices

### Perspectives

This revision of what was entitled "Nine Core Practices" reflects the latest in our collective thinking about the principles and practices characteristic of the approach to instruction we pursue. The principles and practices are not scriptural; they are not oracular. They come from reflections and discussions on the results of classroom instruction. In time, we will refine them again to reflect the best of our thinking.

This approach to instruction is one of several promising approaches, some of which share many of the same principles. We've found that as each of us explores this approach in our classrooms, we broaden the base of experience from which we all work, often engaging other, resonant approaches and strategies. The approach never becomes a "recipe" for any teaching situation, nor a one-best-way teaching methodology that can be grasped through one-shot, in-service programs or teacher "handbooks."

In the contexts in which most of us work, few of us will be able to say that our instruction manifests all of these "core practices." Being able to assert that

is not the point. The point is to constantly review our instructional practices to find ways to engage each core practice. For when that happens, we and our students experience the most elegant and powerful results this approach can deliver.

The goal of schooling—and of this approach to instruction—is a more effective and humane democratic society. Individual development through schooling is a means to that goal. Often given rhetorical approval while being ignored in practice, that goal should infuse every teaching strategy and classroom activity.

As students become more thoughtful participants in their own education, our goal must be to help them become increasingly able and willing to guide their own learning, fearlessly, for the rest of their lives. Through constant evaluation of experience, and examination and application of the curriculum, they approach a state of independence, of responsible behavior, and even, in the best of all worlds, of something called wisdom.

### Core Practices

- 1) **All the work teachers and students do together must flow from student desire, student concerns.** It must be infused from the beginning with student choice, design, revision, execution, reflection and evaluation. Teachers, of course, are still responsible for assessing and ministering to their students' developmental needs.

Most problems that arise during classroom activities must be solved in collaboration with students. When one asks, "Here's a situation that just came up. I don't know what to do about it. What should I do?" the teacher turns that question back to the class to wrestle with and solve, rather than simply answering it. Students are trusted continually, and all are led to the point where they embrace responsibility.

- 2) **Therefore, the role of the teacher must be that of collaborator and team leader and guide rather than boss.** The teacher monitors the academic and social growth of every student, leading each into new areas of understanding and competence.

And the teacher's attitude toward students, toward the work of the class, and toward the content area being taught must model the atti-

tudes expected of students—attitudes and values required to function thoughtfully and responsibly in a democratic society.

- 3) **The academic integrity of the work must be absolutely clear.** Each teacher should embrace state- or local-mandated skill content lists as "givens" to be engaged by the class, accomplish them to the level of mastery in the course of executing the class's plan, but go far beyond their normally narrow confines to discover the value and potential inherent in the content area being taught and its connections to other disciplines.

- 4) **The work is characterized by student action, rather than passive receipt of processed information.** Rather than students doing what they already know how to do, all must be led continually into new work and unfamiliar territory. Once skills are "won," they must be reapplied to new problems in new ways.

Because in such classrooms students are always operating at the very edge of their competence, it must also be made clear to them that the consequence of mistakes is not failure, but posi-

tive, constructive scrutiny of those mistakes by the rest of the class in an atmosphere where students will never be embarrassed.

- 5) A constant feature of the process is its **emphasis on peer teaching, small group work and team-work**. Every student in the room is not only included, but needed, and in the end, each student can identify his or her specific stamp upon the effort. In a classroom thus structured, discipline tends to take care of itself and ceases to be an issue.
- 6) **Connections between the classroom work and surrounding communities and the real world outside the classroom are clear**. The content of all courses is connected to the world in which the students live. For many students, the process will engage them for the first time in identifying and characterizing the communities in which they reside.

Whenever students research larger issues like changing climate patterns, or acid rain, or prejudice, or AIDS, they must "bring them home," identifying attitudes about and illustrations and implications of those issues in their own environments.

- 7) There must be an audience beyond the teacher for student work. It may be another individual, or a small group, or the community, but it must be an audience the students want to serve, or engage, or impress. The audience, in turn, must affirm that the work is important and is needed and is worth doing—and it should, indeed, be all of those.
- 8) As the year progresses, **new activities should spiral gracefully out of the old**, incorporating lessons learned from past experiences, building on skills and understandings that can now be amplified. Rather than a finished product being regarded as the conclusion of a series of activities, it should be regarded as the starting point for a new series.

The questions that should characterize each moment of closure or completion should be, "Now what? What do we know now, and know how to do now, that we didn't know when we started out together? How can we use those skills and that information in some new, more complex and interesting ways? What's next?"

- 9) As teachers, we must acknowledge the worth of aesthetic experience, model that attitude in our

interactions with students, and resist the momentum of policies and practices that deprive students of the chance to use their imaginations. We should help students produce work that is aesthetically satisfying, and help them derive the principles we employ to create beautiful work.

Because they provide the greatest sense of completeness, of the whole, of richness—the most powerful experiences are aesthetic. From those experiences we develop our capacities to appreciate, to refine, to express, to enjoy, to break out of restrictive, unproductive modes of thought.

*Scientific and artistic systems embody the same principles of the relationship of life to its surroundings, and both satisfy the same fundamental needs. —John Dewey*

- 10) **Reflection**—some conscious, thoughtful time to stand apart from the work itself—is an essential activity that must take place at key points throughout the work. It is the activity that evokes insights and nurtures revisions in our plans. It is also the activity we are least accustomed to doing, and therefore the activity we will have to be the most rigorous in including, and for which we will have to help students develop skills.

- 11) **The work must include unstintingly honest, ongoing evaluation for skills and content, and changes in student attitude**. A variety of strategies should be employed, in combination with pre-and post-testing, ranging from simple tests of recall of simple facts through much more complex instruments involving student participation in the creation of demonstrations that answer the teacher challenge, "In what ways will you prove to me at the end of this program that you have mastered the objectives it has been designed to serve?"

Students should be trained to monitor their own progress and devise their own remediation plans, and they should be brought to the point where they can understand that the progress of each student is the concern of every student in the room.

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